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ISHI CONSERVATION CAMP #18

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

SUMMARY

Penal Code 919(b) requires that the Grand Jury look into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county, which includes both state and local correctional facilities.

The Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is currently operating 14 camps. Due to the high rate of COVID 19 in prisons, and the passage of AB 2147, large numbers of incarcerated inmates were released. Four fire camps were closed in the northern region alone. The Ishi Conservation Camp specifically has not experienced a positive case of COVID-19 as of the date of inspection.

GLOSSARY

Ishi Conservation Camp #18, herein referred to as ICC; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, herein referred to as CDCR; California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, herein referred to as CAL FIRE.

BACKGROUND

Ishi Conservation Camp #18 (ICC) opened in April 1961, and is jointly operated by the CDCR and CAL FIRE. The camp's primary mission is to provide inmate fire crews for fire suppression activities in the Tehama, Glenn, Shasta and Plumas County areas. Inmate crews also provide a workforce for conservation service projects in the local area. ICC is an approved provider of the Ready 2 Heat Meals, which are distributed throughout the state to firefighter crews. This is a service provided and run by ICC. Sales are limited to state and local government agencies. ICC also serves as an intensive CAL FIRE training camp for multiple Northern California Conservation Camps.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the 2021 Tehama County Grand Jury conducted interviews with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and CAL FIRE officials, including the Lieutenant in charge of the camp and the Fire Division Chief, on October 21, 2021. The Grand Jury Members toured the CAL FIRE portion of the camp; this included the metal shop, auto shop, garden area, wood cutting operation and wood shop. These activities serve to teach inmates life skills and to provide hands-on experiences that they can take with them back into the community. We were given several success stories of past inmates that have gone through the program. We also toured the CDCR portion of the camp which included dormitories, television room, gym, dining hall, and the mobile kitchen unit. The camp was clean and well maintained.

DISCUSSION

ICC is designed to house 110 inmates, but currently down significantly due to the early release of the inmate population, as well as rampant Covid 19 in the prisons. Inmates are housed in open dormitories with an attached mobile dining vehicle. The kitchen facilities were destroyed in a fire in 2017, and bids and plans to replace the kitchen are underway.

Crews traditionally consist of 17 inmates supervised by 1 captain. In the past, there have been anywhere between 1,700 and 1,900 inmates working on 4-7 crews in the Northern District. Presently, camps are operating 2-3 crews. Inmates are selected by a classification system that excludes those who have committed any sex-related offenses, murder, escape, arson or violent crimes. If an inmate meets a certain criterion, or has a skill set, they may be chosen for a specialized trade that may be useful to the camp. The number of inmates will fluctuate as they rotate in and out of the program. Inmates receive extensive training in clearing roads and trails, tree removal, weed abatement, cutting fuel line breaks, clearing ditches, and flood prevention. They are also trained in fence installation and removal, snow removal, construction projects, along with building maintenance and cleanup, and trash and litter pickup.

Inmates from ICC provided 57,600 hours of firefighting and other emergency work in 2020-2021. Inmates from ICC provided 32,182 hours of community service in 2020-2021. GED testing became available in May 2016 for all inmates. Computers have been ordered and will be available to help them achieve a GED. The positive impact of the program not only on the lives of the inmates, but to the local communities, as well as the entire state, were discussed at length. For many, it is the first time that they have had any guidance or purpose in their lives. It is a rehabilitative program, in that their lives are transformed by the skills and other life lessons learned at the camp. The inmates chop firewood, and with the proceeds, restore bicycles donated to Tehama County Social Services for foster children during the Christmas season. During the ongoing pandemic, one inmate in the wood working shop built 72 picnic tables for a local school, so that they could maintain social distance during outdoor meals. The budget, which varies and is legislatively controlled, was discussed. There are currently eight fire captains, down from 10 due to budget constraints. Safety concerns due to less available manpower because of early release and the ongoing pandemic, as well as the added stress placed on equipment from overuse, were discussed. Doing the same amount of work with less manpower and equipment, as well as less staff, is an ongoing concern.

COMMENDATIONS

C1 CDCR, CAL FIRE, as well as the inmates of ICC are to be commended for their ongoing community service of 32,182 service hours and 57,600 firefighting hours in 2020-2021.

C2 CDCR, CAL FIRE and the inmates of ICC are to be commended for their ongoing commitment to community projects that benefit Tehama County.

RECOMMENDATION

R1 The staff of CDCR and CAL FIRE take pride in being part of ICC. They witness the transformation of inmates on a daily basis. We recommend that this worthy rehabilitation program be funded and supported by the State of California.